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AUTHOR	Lange, Cheryl M.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the impact of open enrollment policies in Minnesota on eight school districts with larger than average transfers of students with disabilities. A series of case studies investigated implementation issues, effects on special education programs, effects on decision making in funding and planning, perceptions and opinions of school personnel about open enrollment, and characteristics of districts that gain or lose students with disabilities through open enrollment. Results were complex, as enrollment size and program quality alone did not explain the gain or loss of students with disabilities through open enrollment. Administrators and teachers did not give wide endorsement to the idea that the quality of special education programs improved because of open enrollment. Improved communication between school personnel and families did seem to be a key issue in open enrollment. For those districts gaining students with disabilities, there were few negative outcomes; districts losing students with disabilities were losing a great deal. Several recommendations are offered for consideration when evaluating open enrollment and the participation of students with disabilities. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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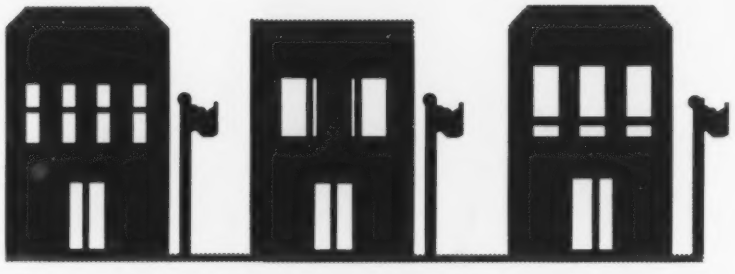

Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities

Cheryl M. Lange, James E. Ysseldyke, and Thomas J. Delaney

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Open Enrollment's Impact on School Districts When Students with Disabilities Transfer Schools

Cheryl M. Lange, James E. Ysseldyke, and Thomas J. Delaney

University of Minnesota

June, 1995

Abstract

School choice options are now available in over half of the states. Many students are accessing these options including students with disabilities and special needs. In this study, one of the most popular school choice options, open enrollment is examined to determine the impact transferring students with disabilities have on school districts. The gain or loss of students with disabilities is investigated through a series of case studies in Minnesota where open enrollment was first implemented. Implementation issues, special education programs, funding and planning, school personnel's perceptions about open enrollment, and characteristics of net gain and net loss districts are examined.

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Open Enrollment's Impact on School Districts When Students with Disabilities Transfer Schools

It has been over a decade since advocates for school choice policy took their crusade to policymakers and legislators. During this time school choice legislation has been passed or proposed in over half the states (Cookson, 1994; Ysseldyke, Lange, & Delaney, 1992). Forms of choice now include intradistrict choice (open enrollment), interdistrict choice, second chance programs, postsecondary options, and charter schools. While the pros and cons of school choice have been debated and discussed thoroughly, there has been little examination of its impact on students or school districts. There are scant research findings documenting the outcome of school choice for the general school population (Cookson, 1994); there is even less information about how school choice is affecting special populations or the school districts that serve them (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Algozzine, & Nathan; 1991).

When students with disabilities transfer through school choice, several issues arise for school districts. These issues include concerns about implementation, financial responsibility, individual education programs (IEP), and planning (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Algozzine; 1991). These issues are particularly relevant when students with disabilities transfer through a school choice option such as open enrollment. Open enrollment is one of the most far-reaching and extensive forms of school choice. Generally, it allows students to transfer to any school district in the state with few restrictions. The extent to which school districts are impacted when students with disabilities transfer through open enrollment and the factors that influence the impact are important for parents, teachers, administrators, and legislators to address.

Though several states have open enrollment policies, Minnesota provides the ideal setting in which to conduct a study examining open enrollment's impact on school districts when students with disabilities transfer. Minnesota was the first state to pass open enrollment legislation and school district personnel have had years of experience implementing the policy.

Minnesota's School Choice Experiences

Over 60,000 students participate in Minnesota's seven enrollment options. Thousands of additional students transfer to a school of choice through intradistrict choice programs in the larger school districts. One option available to all students in Minnesota with the potential to impact all school districts is interdistrict choice or open enrollment.

Open enrollment allows any student to apply for transfer to any other district in the state. The application must be filed before January 15th for transfer the following fall. School districts may deny transfer for only two reasons: a lack of space or the transfer resulting in noncompliance with desegregation rules. Open enrollment has been available to all families since the 1990-1991 school year and participation has grown from 5,940 students in 1990 to over 15,000 during the 1993-1994 school year.

Students with disabilities are participating in open enrollment and their participation has increased over the years. During the 1990-1991 school year, students with disabilities comprised approximately 5% of Minnesota's open enrollment transfers (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Gorney, 1994). By 1993-1994, over 10% of the participants were regarded as having a disability or a special educational need.

Given the state population of approximately 750,000 K-12 school children, the number of open enrollment transfers would not appear to be very significant. And, given the small number of participants who have disabilities or special needs, it would appear that these transfers may have little effect on the operation of a school district. Yet, what must be considered is the distribution of the transfers and the enrollment of individual school districts. There are a number of districts that have sizable enrollment shifts due to open enrollment. Participants include students with disabilities.

Qualitative Study

Critically analyzing selected school districts' experiences with open enrollment through qualitative analyses provides the deepest understanding of how school districts are impacted

when students with disabilities transfer. The qualitative approach allows researchers to "preserve chronological flow, assess local causality, and derive fruitful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1985). Through qualitative study a rich story emerges that can help policymakers understand the "ins and outs" of legislated policy (Krathwohl, 1993; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1989). In this study, the impact of open enrollment on eight Minnesota school districts with larger than average transfers of students with disabilities was examined through qualitative inquiry. The following research questions were addressed:

- What are the implementation issues when students with disabilities transfer through open enrollment?
- To what extent are special education programs affected when students with disabilities transfer through open enrollment?
- To what extent are planning, funding, and other decision-making practices affected when students with disabilities transfer?
- What are the perceptions and opinions of school personnel about open enrollment and the transfer of students with disabilities?
- What are the characteristics of districts that gain or lose students with disabilities through open enrollment?

Methods

District Selection

Open enrollment applications received by the Minnesota Department of Education for the 1990-1991 school year were reviewed. From these applications the number of students with disabilities seeking to transfer from each Minnesota school district was determined. A set of criteria was developed with which to select school districts. The criteria included: (1) district location, (2) school district enrollment, (3) number of students with and without disabilities transferring through open enrollment, and (4) district proximity. School districts were selected in a pairwise or group manner so that the relationship between school districts could be analyzed.

Based on these criteria, three clusters of school districts were identified. The clusters included districts that had a net gain or loss of special education students, were in close

proximity to each other, had varying enrollments, and were representative of different geographic areas of the state. The clusters were defined as follows:

> Metro Border Districts: Three districts adjacent to each other. One is a large suburban district; the other two are similar-sized rural districts in close proximity to the metropolitan area.
>
> Rural Group A: Two districts in an agricultural region of the state that is experiencing declining enrollment. One is a business hub for the area; the other is an adjacent, small K-8 district.
>
> Rural Group B: Three districts in an agricultural/tourist region of the state that have growing enrollments. One larger district is the business hub on the area; the other two are adjacent districts with different enrollment sizes.

In Table 1 net gain or loss of special education students and student enrollment are presented for each school district within the clusters.

Table 1

Enrollment and Open Enrollment Gain or Loss by Districts

	Metro Border			Rural A		Rural B		
	MB1	MB2	MB3	RA1	RA2	RB1	RB2	RB3
Net Gain or Loss District	Gain	Loss	Gain	Gain	Loss	Loss	Gain	Loss
Student Enrollment*	1,585	1,500	7,466	1,396	117**	540	6,800	1,607

*1992-1993 school year

**Grades K-8 only

Design of Domains

After an extensive review of the literature, sets of items addressing aspects of school district operation and open enrollment policy were identified. These domains (including areas such as criteria and admissions, special education programs, student enrollment, etc.) were later collapsed into five thematic areas: open enrollment implementation, special education

programming, funding and planning, personnel perceptions and opinions about open enrollment policy, and district characteristics. The thematic areas and domains under each are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Domain Categories

Open Enrollment Implementation

- Admission Criteria and Procedures
- Counseling and Processing
- Information Provision and Distribution

Special Education Programs

- Special Education Program and Inclusion
- Students At-Risk and Dropouts

Funding and Planning

- Planning and Decision Making
- Finances
- School Buildings and Additions
- Marketing

Perceptions and Opinions of Open Enrollment

- Perceptions of Reasons Parents Transfer Children
- Opinions About Open Enrollment

District Characteristics

- Student Enrollment
- Student, Family, and Community Characteristics
- Student and Parent Demographics and Activities
- Community and Interagency Cooperation
- Teachers and Paraprofessionals
- School Climate
- Curriculum Changes/Course Offerings
- Student Support Services

Selection of Data Sources and Measurement Instruments

After district selection, personnel within school districts were identified as potential sources of information. These were: superintendents, financial officers, directors of special education, principals, special education teachers, general education teachers, and school board members. Interviews were designed for each group of respondents using the domain areas as the framework for the interview protocols.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in the spring of 1993 with 5-12 key informants in each of the eight school districts selected for study. Each district visit lasted one to three days. Two interviewers conducted all interviews. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed.

Transcribed statements were sorted into relevant predesignated domains. Statements were included in more than one domain when appropriate. Domain areas were then collapsed into the five thematic areas. Content analysis was conducted on each domain area to determine overriding themes and conclusions.

Results

Data are organized according to the five thematic areas: implementation; special education program; funding and planning; personnel perceptions and opinions of open enrollment policy; and district characteristics. The experiences of all school districts are summarized within each area.

Implementation of Open Enrollment

Several areas of open enrollment implementation for students with disabilities were studied. Included in the analysis were the school districts' criteria for admission, admission procedures, and individual education plan practices.

Criteria for admissions and admission procedures. One of the major areas of concern for special education advocates was the possibility that students with disabilities would be denied transfer to their chosen school through open enrollment. Students with disabilities were not denied access due to admission or special criteria in any of the eight school districts in this study. Administrators indicated that they followed the law but had no formal admissions policy for general education students or students with disabilities. Whether a student had a disability or special need may have been a concern after the transfer occurred but did not appear to influence the admittance or admissions procedures. A special education director of an educational cooperative serving many rural districts was quite philosophical about admissions and illustrates the pervasive attitude:

> Kids are more important than the district they live in. They really are, and [special education students] have the same rights. I mean, our athletic banquet was last night and all over the radio this morning is talk of the student athlete of the year. Well, [she] is an open enrollment student...We found room to accommodate her, didn't we? Maybe we better find room to accommodate the special education kid who wants to come here too.

Though some districts reported restricting the approval of students with disabilities if their programs were considered full; none of the districts had actually denied enrollment to a student for this reason. One district with such a policy had extremely large caseloads for the special education teachers but did not deny any open enrollment applicants. Districts were taking all students; whether the student had a disability did not appear to enter into the decision.

Individual Education Programs (IEPs). Findings from a survey of administrators conducted prior to case study data collection efforts revealed concerns about IEPs and additional assessment costs when students with disabilities transfer through open enrollment (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Algozzine; 1991). Interviews with directors of special education and other administrators did not find this concern to be valid in the eight districts studied. Rather, attention to the IEP meetings and involvement in the IEP process after the transfer had occurred had much greater impact on the potential program costs.

Administrators acknowledged using the existing IEP when a child transferred. Only in the larger districts was there a possibility that the child might be inadvertently reassessed. In these districts, personnel reported that they often do not know which students have transferred into the district through open enrollment. Since some parents do not indicate that their child has received special services when applying for open enrollment, these students may be reassessed after the transfer. No district reported an unfair burden in costs due to additional assessments.

Attendance at IEP meetings, however, did impact program decisions and ultimately financial considerations for the resident or sending district. Attendance at IEP meetings was central to determining program control for the two districts involved in the transfer of a student with a disability. Additional services can be added at these meetings as well as a change in program direction. Those districts that sent representatives to IEP meetings were more involved with the process and the outcomes for their transferring students. This meant they had more control of costs and program decisions. In Minnesota, the excess program costs are billed back to the resident district. If the resident district does not have a representative at the IEP meeting, they abdicate control over any programming decisions. This may prove to be costly if the non-resident district is not judicious in its recommendation of services.

A complicating factor for principals was that students with disabilities do not always identify themselves as such when they apply for open enrollment. One rural high school principal stated, "My druthers would be [that] they could come with an IEP [Individual Education Plan] in hand. The biggest problem any district has is if you have a kid with special needs come in, the parents often think 'Well, change of location, change of pace, maybe things will work out O.K.' Hence we're not even aware if the students have special needs." Principals indicated they wanted to know if a child had received special education services so they could respond to their needs proactively rather than reacting to a difficult situation.

Special Education Program

Differences in special education programs between school districts including student caseloads, inclusion practices, parent/staff communication, and school personnel perceptions of

program quality were considered. The role open enrollment played in terminating or changing special education services for students was also examined.

Student caseloads. Student caseloads varied among all districts. However, it was interesting that those districts that were gaining students had the largest caseloads per teacher. Class sizes in these districts were also larger.

Inclusion practices. Inclusion practices differed between districts. Generally, larger school districts had more inclusive programs. There was general movement in all districts toward more inclusive educational programming for students with disabilities. Though larger school districts were further along in providing inclusion services, this did not appear to be a factor in the gain or loss of students through open enrollment.

Parent/school staff communication. There appeared to be differences in parent/staff communication efforts between net gain and net loss districts. Administrators from districts gaining special education students reported strong home-school communication practices. There was an apparent value placed on developing close relationships between school personnel and parents. Often these efforts were related to informing residents about their programs in addition to communicating student progress. These efforts were not evident in the net loss districts.

Perceptions of program quality. All administrators spoke of the high quality of their special education programs. Administrators from the school districts that were gaining students with disabilities outlined the positive characteristics of their special education programs. As a director in a metropolitan border district explained, "We're noted for having an excellent special education [program]. We are one of a few districts...that have one continuum of services. We give the services they need. It is a very cooperative, collaborative arrangement. We work well with the classroom teachers. Parents see that." A superintendent at a rural district sung the praises of his special education program:

> Especially in regards to special education, almost all of the students who have come in this year have indicated something to do with the quality of the program. In other words, they are from a smaller town. They do not feel their community or their school has high enough incidence level or special education needs to require the staff.

Administrators and school board members from net loss districts were less willing to articulate the positive aspects of their programs. When asked the same question about programs and services they did not expand on what was offered or on the quality of their programs.

Some informants believed there was a defined difference between special education programs and school districts commitment to special education students. A director of special education familiar with a net gain and a net loss district included in the study believed commitment made a difference to parents when making transfer decisions. "Some districts are a lot more committed to providing services to exceptional kids than others. They are willing to spend dollars on it. But those that haven't been doing that, I don't think really understand the benefits ...." When asked if the commitment to special education made a difference in the transfer of students, he indicated three families had moved from a less committed district to a more committed district in the past year.

Use of open enrollment for termination of services. A concern of many reviewing open enrollment and special education is the possibility that students will use open enrollment as a lever to change their special education program, thereby circumventing the case study process. Some directors of special education found this to be the case. One director of a large metropolitan border district talked about how open enrollment is used by some students to begin again in a new setting. She noted that:

> We have kids coming from [many neighboring districts] where parents are looking at [open enrollment] not so much for [academic reasons], but sometimes it is an alternative to something in the community that is very specific—where the kid has been with this group of kids all through school and they want a change. Or, maybe they have been in treatment or something and want a fresh start.

But this director also indicated that sometimes the parents are more interested in terminating services; "nine times out of ten when that happens in a matter of months the student will come up in a pre-referral or assessment to you."

Open enrollment and students with emotional behavioral disabilities. Many administrators indicated that there was one group of students for whom open enrollment

provided an opportunity for a fresh start: students with emotional/behavioral disabilities (EBD). However, the opportunity for a fresh start was often not initiated by the students. Administrators reported that these students are encouraged to use open enrollment or other enrollment options to transfer out of their resident districts. Administrators acknowledged that the encouragement is often not an open invitation to leave the school but is a subtle suggestion that they may be more welcome elsewhere.

When asked if districts are encouraging students with emotional/behavioral disabilities to leave, an administrator of a large school district noted; "Selectively, there is some of that. That has always been true. There are certain kids that in a building may be persona non grata. The principal would love to see them take off. A lot of that is informal. They don't acknowledge that as openly as they probably could." This administrator went on to say that some at-risk students are being forced out of their buildings. "Unless I'm very mistaken, I don't think this is a case where a kid plots to drop out of school to go somewhere else. I think he is forced out and then says, 'I'll find a place that will take me.'" A special education administrator in this district reported that "[schools] are shuffling them out," but she also wanted to make clear that it was not always the school personnel who were making this choice. She stated, "Don't underestimate [the student's] choice in the matter."

Administrators in rural districts also indicated that students identified as EBD or at-risk of problem behavior are often encouraged directly or indirectly to leave. A director familiar with several school districts was asked about this issue. He responded that, "Sure, absolutely [kids are pushed out]. They are better off out of the mainstream." In another part of the state a director acknowledged that districts are trying to keep most special education students because of the funding and control issues involved. However, there was one group they are not trying to keep: "the really tough kids." He felt that, "typically the kids who are leaving are EBD kids. The kids are so tough to deal with that it is better to see them leave." In another district the director talked about the relationship of disability category to transfer. "...A lot of administration in the district

would just as soon figure out how to get [EBD kids] out of the building." He went on to explain that choice is the vehicle for this happening:

> It happens with all the choice options really, and part of that is really that parents get disgusted. Each kid will test any system and pretty soon the parent gets tired, the principal gets tired, the counselor is tired, the special education student has been exhausted and everybody is cheering when they [decide to leave]. And they don't care what the deal is at that point. You know even the [school board] at a small school at that point says, 'here, I'll sign [your open enrollment application form].

Though acknowledging students with emotional/behavioral disabilities were being encouraged to transfer to their schools, most principals flatly denied that any students with emotional behavior disabilities were being encouraged to leave their schools. A principal in a small metropolitan border district gaining students from a neighboring district stated that he suspected some students had been unduly encouraged to leave their former school district, especially "at-risk" students. He thought it may be the decision of a parent looking for a fresh start for their child or coercion on the part of the school district, although he couldn't be sure which was the case.

While many administrators acknowledged that some students were encouraged to use open enrollment or another enrollment option to leave their district, they also were very concerned about how to best provide a successful program for these students. It did not appear that encouraging students to leave was always a matter of the easy way out. Though they may encourage a student to leave, another with similar characteristics will be at their door from a neighboring district.

While central administrators admitted that personnel at the building level were often encouraging "tough" students to leave, many administrators were also in the process of forming new programs for at-risk students. There appears to be a dichotomy when providing special programs for "at-risk" students. On the one hand, staff reaches a point where they want to see individual students educated elsewhere, but on the other hand, they acknowledge the need for improved programs to serve the large numbers of students who are exhibiting at-risk behaviors or have emotional behavior disabilities.

Funding and Planning

The extent to which school district finances and planning were impacted by the transfer of students with disabilities was dependent upon the circumstances of the transfer and the size of the district. Larger districts were in a better position to absorb the gain or loss of students through open enrollment than were smaller districts. Transportation costs and program add-ons had the greatest effect on district finances relating to open enrollment transfers.

Financial impact. Most district administrators indicated that there was not a large financial impact when students with disabilities transferred unless the student was involved in a transportation or program placement controversy. Interestingly, of the eight districts studied, five had been involved in just such a controversy-either as a receiving district or a sending district.

One director noted, however, that the loss of students with disabilities must be viewed as a part of the total loss of students when looking at the financial impact. "Financial impact is not just on special ed. It is on the whole district-when you lose $3050 [state foundation aid] for every elementary kid and about $3986--close to $4,000 dollars for every high school kid. And, every time you do that, you lose ten kids to open enrollment; that is a whole teacher position." He went on to explain the impact on a small district in the study that had lost eight special education students over the past two years.

> The thing that happens there is that I'm not sure it causes a difference in special ed. but it causes a difference in the rest of the system. The reason being is that special ed. services are mandated services so you have to have staff there whether it is for a few kids or not. If you lose those kids, and it takes away the $25,000 for those 8 kids, you still have to have a special ed. staff. So, what it has done is take that 25,000 moneys away from all the others. And, that is where the cut takes place, then, in the other programs. And, because of that, special ed. is getting a bad word in the district. They are saying, 'Why should we continue to educate those kids at the expense of those who do not need the services.'

For districts that are gaining special education students there is also financial gain. Students are usually placed in existing programs with no additional cost to the district. In fact, one district had case loads of 30 to 35 students per special education teacher and was still

accepting students. In all net-gain districts, the administrators reported classes were overcrowded and class sizes were increasing. Consequently, additional students transferring in through open enrollment would only impact their financial situation positively.

Transportation. Transportation of students with disabilities had the potential to impact school district finances. Transportation concerns were in three areas: (1) determination of responsibility for transportation costs, (2) transportation and IEPs and (3) parents as paid transportation providers.

There was considerable confusion about who was responsible for the costs of transporting an open enrollment student with a disability. The Minnesota open enrollment law specifies that parents bear the responsibility for transportation to the border of the chosen district. There is a provision for families who qualify for transportation aid due to their family income. Unless the transportation arrangements were specified in the student's IEP, the law was the same for all students.

However, administrators gave differing interpretations of the law. In one district, transportation of students with disabilities was considered the responsibility of the resident district. One administrator interpreted the law to mean that "if transportation is required because he's handicapped, that is the [resident] school district's responsibility-even if it's open enrollment." Yet in another nearby district, an administrator concluded transportation was not their responsibility and gave an example of how after some controversy, they had worked out an arrangement with the non-resident district to provide transportation.

Since the law was interpreted differently, it meant school districts were not being held responsible for the costs uniformly. Consequently, the costs for transportation could be paid by any of three parties; the resident district, nonresident district, or the parents. Where school districts are geographically close, this may or may not be an imposition; but, in some of the rural districts the cost of transporting a student could in be excess of $30,000 a year. These costs were particularly burdensome for small rural districts.

Another transportation issue centered on the role of the IEP and transportation responsibility. The IEP meeting was often where transportation responsibility was determined. If the non-resident district agreed that transportation was required and it was claimed on the IEP, the resident district became responsible for the transportation. Directors of special education saw the IEP meeting as crucial to the determination of transportation costs. Some, in fact, believed savvy parents were using the meeting to shift their responsibility for transportation to the resident district. One director of special education put it this way, "Required, means on the IEP, and it doesn't take very long for somebody to figure out how to get that on the IEP." Another noted how the IEP meeting often was the point at which transportation decisions were made. In one case, a child's extracurricular transportation needs were written into the IEP. "And, lo and behold, during the staffing it was written into the IEP that the [resident] district would provide transportation for extracurricular activities. But, [the non-resident] district didn't care because they weren't the ones providing the transportation or paying for it. Districts do that sometimes. That is the frustrating part of it. It gets very spendy."

In those cases where the IEP specified transportation, the resident district had not had representation at the IEP meeting. Often times the administrators did not require a representative even when they were aware that decisions about transportation may be made. However, those districts with tight management of IEP meetings for open enrollment transfers had no history of problems with transportation costs being decided by IEP team members at a cost to their district.

In some districts, the decision to pay for the transportation of special education students transferring through open enrollment led to a unique situation with the parents. In more than one instance, parents requested that they become the transportation provider and receive the monetary reimbursement. In one case this amounted to a figure in excess of $30,000 per year.

Though most school administrators had at least one horror story about transportation costs and the open enrollment of students with disabilities, they also reported that most students with disabilities did not require special consideration and were not a financial burden to the

district. However, expensive transportation costs were especially difficult for small school districts to absorb even if there were only a few such cases.

Excess costs. If there is one phrase that would typify many administrators feelings about open enrollment and the transfer of students with disabilities it would be "loss of control"; particularly in the area of excess costs. Excess costs, those costs over and above state and federal aid, are billed to the resident school district. This arrangement serves to motivate resident school districts into providing adequate services, thereby encouraging students to remain in their home districts. However, several administrators voiced concern about the resulting loss of control over costs for which they were ultimately responsible when students chose to transfer. The extent of the concern, however, depended upon the side of the student enrollment ledger on which the district fell.

In general, those districts that were gaining students with disabilities did not indicate that excess costs were a problem. This was expected since in most cases they were the ones charging for the services versus paying the costs. However, for districts that had a net loss of special education students, there was concern about how the costs were handled. Though these administrators voiced concern over the costs, there was little attention paid to controlling them. In contrast, net gain districts, especially those with financial problems, kept a close eye on open enrollment students entering or leaving their districts and acknowledged the potential impact of open enrollment transfers.

Some administrators thought the loss of control over the per pupil costs lent itself to abuse by the non-resident district. One superintendent in a rural district who had lost several students articulated it in this way: "What we find from the financial part of it is there is the tendency to, just in my opinion, to provide additional aid and those kinds of things and bill back the resident district....It's always easier to provide the extra services if you know somebody else is paying for them."

The service delivery system also seemed to affect administrators' attitudes about excess costs. Most of Minnesota's rural school districts are organized into educational cooperatives.

Services such as special education are provided within the cooperative. The districts in our study who had students transferring between the cooperative members had little concern over excess costs since there was a mediating agent, the director of special education. Each cooperative had a director who had responsibility for all the districts in the cooperative. Costs were usually more uniform and often the director set the costs rather than the school district administrators. However, when the transfer took place outside of the cooperative or if the district was not involved in a cooperative, the issues of fairness and control surfaced.

Not all district administrators had concerns about excess costs. Two superintendents did not believe excess costs were a problem for their school districts. It was interesting to note that these superintendents were not aware of the number of special education students leaving their districts. Yet, both districts had lost enough revenue through open enrollment special education transfer to affect their finances and ultimately their programs.

Planning. None of the personnel interviewed indicated that planning was affected by the transfer of students with disabilities. Net gain districts were adding open enrollment students to the classrooms and special education caseloads without any formal plan. While the transfer of students with disabilities may affect teachers and their ability to deliver services, districtwide planning efforts were not affected.

Except for the difficulties presented by the loss of revenues, districts with a net loss of students did not note serious planning difficulties. These administrators did not keep a close eye on the transfers; consequently, did not spend time dealing with related planning issues. A more important issue for them was the change in delivery of special education services that was occurring in their districts and surrounding districts.

Many special education programs had been "farmed out" to other districts over the years and were now being developed in resident districts. The programs had often been costly for many school districts as they would pay tuition for their students to be served by another district. The return of low-incidence programs has affected planning for districts since the advent of open enrollment. Prior to open enrollment, a district could make the decision to return a special

education program and the students necessarily came back with the program. Open enrollment has changed the dynamics of this decision. Now families can decide to keep their child in the non-resident district regardless of what program is offered in their resident district. The district no longer has control over the families decision to return. One rural superintendent noted, "when the school district has put together a program for low incidence kids, the district holds its breath hoping that all of them will stay since they are all needed for the program to be financially viable." The problem was more acute for smaller districts with fewer students with disabilities and a minimum of resources.

Open enrollment resulted in another planning issue for administrators that involved relationships between school districts. Many small rural districts have been interdependent for many years. Administrators looked to each other for support, encouragement, and the sharing of ideas and programs. However, for districts that have students leaving or in some cases not returning to a home-based special education program, the dynamics have changed. Some found it difficult to bill back for services when special education students chose their district over the home district. Many administrators in districts that were gaining students were uncomfortable with the change in the relationship. While many superintendents had depended upon neighboring administrators to help with planning decisions that might be in everyone's best interest, they now were more reticent to discuss their plans and look for support from this group.

Marketing the district. Nearly all administrators interviewed admitted that marketing their school district had improved since the open enrollment law was enacted. Those administrators who acknowledged the importance of marketing and its relationship to school choice were often in the districts that had also gained students.

Only one district saw the marketing of special education services as a possibility. This district was losing a sizable number of students with disabilities to a neighboring suburban district and an alternative program for at-risk students. The superintendent saw special education as being a possible drawing card for their district. They had already implemented a program for at-risk students that was bringing non-resident students into the district. He observed that "I

could see that sometime in the future we would aggressively attract special education students. The way the funding works, the state provides the core money and passes the excess costs back to the district of residence. We could really offer a "Cadillac" program. We could offer a much better program and make the home district pay for it." All other administrators, however, did not see special education as being a program they would market outside the district. In fact, they were quite opposed to the idea of an overt external marketing plan targeting students from other districts.

However, those districts that were gaining students were notably different than others in their approach to marketing their school districts within their communities. Administrators from districts gaining students made a conscious effort to inform residents of their programs. They did this through the use of brochures, staff development training, parent communication efforts, local media releases and administrator outreach. One director of special education had a definite plan for the superintendents in his special education cooperative. He told them that parents will "imprint" to the school district that shows them the most concern and attention. He felt parents were looking for a school district that cared about the needs of their child regardless of the specific program. Consequently, he suggested personal contact between the superintendent and the parents as soon as the school administrator was aware of a serious disability in the family. He gave an example of a superintendent who visited a family in the hospital after their child was born and diagnosed with a disability. This was to assure the parents that the education of their child was of utmost importance to the school district and to ensure a positive relationship with the family. His philosophy was that many special education controversies could be avoided with this type of effort.

In contrast were the attitudes of two superintendents who had several students with disabilities transferring out of their districts. In one case, the superintendent had to contend with consolidation concerns that were more pressing than open enrollment. He did not believe it was fair to "market" his district to the residents because he could not give parents any assurance that the school would even exist in a few years. Financial constraints could mean residents would

choose to consolidate with another district. In the other net loss district, the superintendent believed that marketing had no impact on parents' transfer decisions. He believed they were choosing other districts for "emotional reasons" and that internal marketing had no effect on their decisions.

Implementation of open enrollment has renewed the importance of publicity and marketing for the building administrations in our sample. School personnel in gaining districts maintained or developed specific strategies to attract families into investigating their features. The important features for prospective students most frequently reported by principals and teachers were the school's inclusion policy, the integrity of faculty, variety of coursework, degree of support by administration of special education, and social aspects.

Perceptions and Opinions About Enrollment

Personnel had both perceptions about the reasons parents transferred their children with disabilities through open enrollment and opinions about its effectiveness as a reform policy. Both illustrate the attitudes of school personnel toward open enrollment policy when addressing its potential to impact school districts.

School personnel's perceptions of reasons for open enrollment transfers. Data from an earlier survey of Minnesota parents of students with disabilities transferring through open enrollment found the most frequently reported reasons for transfer were related to the needs of the special education students (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Gorney, 1994). The top reasons reported were: (1) special education needs were better met at the chosen school, (2) teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention, (3) our child's friends, brothers, or sisters attend(ed) the new school, (4) special education teachers at the chosen school keep me more informed of my child's progress.

Did administrators', principals', and teachers' perceptions of reasons parents transferred their children match those reasons reported by parents? Central administrators were less likely to acknowledge that parents transferred due to dissatisfaction with the school program or home-school communication efforts. Principals' and teachers' perceptions more often matched those of

parents reporting class size, better special education services, and greater course variety as the central reasons parents with disabilities transfer their children.

Many district administrators and school board members believed parent transfer decisions were based on locale, parent's job location, and community affinity. In addition to the geographic reason for transfer, superintendents who had a net student gain mentioned their high quality special education programs. However, superintendents in districts losing students did not believe they were losing them as a result of the quality of their special education program. Directors of special education reported the reasons for transfer of students with disabilities as being related to the history of the student. If the student had been involved in a tuition arrangement with the nonresident district prior to open enrollment, they believed the prior placement affected the open enrollment decision.

Open Enrollment: Good or Bad? School personnel from net-gain districts and net-loss districts differed on whether open enrollment was a good educational policy. As to be expected, personnel from districts gaining students with disabilities held positive views about its effect on education and on their district; respondents from net-loss districts were less enthusiastic. In either case, respondents acknowledged the inevitability of the policy and the need to live with its impact in the best possible way.

Though open enrollment was not universally excepted as a good policy, personnel in all districts spoke of its benefits for students. The group most often mentioned as benefiting from open enrollment and other choice options was students with behavior problems. One director spoke about this advantage for students with emotional/behavioral disabilities:

> We've had a situation even in one case where an EBD kid almost became the talk of a small community...You walk down the street and people in the coffee shop know this kid. You can put him in a [neighboring, larger district] and get rid of the notoriety and get rid of some of the recognition that he has. That is not all bad. Yes, he's a pain in the neck, but, you can deal with it and get some progress. And to that degree...is he better off? You bet he is? Is he doing better? You bet!...Choice becomes a good option for this kid.

Another Director, who believed open enrollment was a detrimental policy shared a similar sentiment. He noted that open enrollment could have a positive impact "only if [students] have

such a bad reputation that they can no longer be around their peers here. And, if they get a fresh start wherever they [go]."

Most teachers and principals either did not have an opinion about open enrollment or were skeptical about its capability to be a catalyst for school reform. However, they did acknowledge the benefit for the individual students who needed a change in educational environment and the merits of providing parents with choices in the education of their children.

District Characteristics

There were characteristics that emerged in the discussion with the many school staff interviewed that helped define differences between districts that gained or loss students with disabilities. These characteristics centered on communication efforts, district size, and administrator savvy about open enrollment and its possible effects. Listed below are the district characteristics defined by gain or loss of students.

Net Gain Districts. Specific characteristics suggested to be associated with districts gaining students with disabilities through open enrollment are:

- Effective home-school communication efforts.
- Well-articulated special education programs.
- Internal marketing plans aimed at district residents.
- Knowledge of transfer numbers.
- More support services available.
- Closer monitoring of transferring students' IEPs.
- Larger class sizes and special education caseloads.
- Less financial impact.
- Personnel more attuned to open enrollment's possible effects.
- Positive strategies for combating the impact of open enrollment.

Net Loss Districts. Characteristics of net loss districts often contrasted with those of net gain districts. One small rural district was an exception to this generalization. This district had many of the characteristics outlined above. School personnel were working hard on

implementing a marketing strategy, communication with families, and providing a "niche" for families who might want a smaller district. It appeared that this district would have a better chance of maintaining a viable special education program as a result of its efforts. However, other districts experiencing a net loss of students with disabilities did not possess the characteristics listed above. For these districts the common characteristics were the following:

- Negative financial impact due to transportation and excess costs issues.
- Little to no monitoring of students leaving the district.
- Little consideration of the possible impact when students with disabilities transferred.
- Little to no involvement in the IEP process for transferring students.
- Poor home-school communication efforts.
- No formal internal marketing of resident families.

A major finding emerging from this study was the lack of involvement in open enrollment policy implementation by administrators and teachers. Many superintendents in net loss districts were surprised by the number of students with disabilities leaving and did not voice concern over the loss of families or the loss of financial support. As a result, there was little monitoring of transferring students. Teachers were often not aware of how open enrollment may be impacting their district.

Loss of control over finances and the transferring students' special education program were concerns of these administrators, but few procedures were implemented to gain control. This may have been due to their underestimating the numbers of students leaving the district. It also may have been due to a philosophical orientation that put the responsibility for transfer with the parents; believing cause-effect outside the realm of the school district's power. There was resignation about their power to affect the decisions of families. In contrast to the personnel in the net gain districts, they did not make a connection between their behavior and the parents' decision to transfer.

Characteristics Common to Both Net Gain and Net Loss Districts. There were characteristics that were common to all districts. These involved impact on the district as well as the perceptions of the district personnel about open enrollment and students with disabilities.

- Administrators' perceptions of reasons for transfer contrasted sharply with reasons given by parents.
- All students were accepted to districts regardless of class sizes or caseloads.
- Encouragement of some EBD students to transfer through school choice options.
- Open enrollment's minimal impact on teachers' day-to-day decisions.
- Teachers were not involved in policy discussions.

Discussion

Administrators and teachers did not give wide endorsement to the idea that the quality of special education programs improved because of open enrollment. Elements related to improved programming such as communication between home and school, however, did seem to be affected by open enrollment policy. Communication efforts were better in school districts with a net-gain in student transfers. Administrators in net-gain districts indicated that their efforts to communicate with parents had improved since open enrollment. Parent survey data strongly suggest that good communication between home and school influences the transfer decision (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Gorney, 1994). Communication efforts between school personnel and families is a key issue to address for districts evaluating open enrollment and its impact on the transfer of students with disabilities.

For those districts gaining students with disabilities there were few negative outcomes. Their financial situation improved, thereby providing additional funds for needed programs. Rather than hire additional teachers, they placed students in existing classrooms avoiding increased personnel costs. However, the large special education caseloads and the increased class sizes in these districts does need further study. Whether the increase in students resulted in less service or deteriorating service was not determined.

Districts losing students with disabilities were losing a great deal. Not only were they losing funds that could improve their school system, they were losing families that could take an active part in their community. Though school personnel saw little relationship between the loss of students and decreases in funding, it did appear to be a factor in their financial health and ultimately their program.

Given the characteristics of net gain and net loss districts, it appears school districts can affect the transfer of students with disabilities and the impact of open enrollment legislation on their districts. To some extent the gain or loss of students with disabilities appears to be related to administrative practices and strategies. However, contextual variables such as the enrollment

size of the district and its place in the community (e.g., community market hub, agricultural hub, suburban vs. rural) cannot be ignored.

All districts gaining students with disabilities had larger student enrollment than the surrounding districts; thus, it is difficult to determine if that characteristic alone accounted for the gain of students. Many administrators attributed the gain or loss of any student through open enrollment to the proximity of the chosen school and the student's residence. However, past parent surveys have not found location to be the major reason for transfer. Parents have been quite articulate in explaining their reasons for transferring their children. These reasons were related to the child's special education needs between better met in the chosen school district and the relationship between the school and home (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Gorney; 1994; Lange, Ysseldyke, Lau, & Lehr; 1995).

Other characteristics associated with gaining districts may be a result of their size. Internal marketing, communication efforts, and monitoring may be more easily achieved in districts with more central administration and support staff. However, given that the case study sites included districts of varying sizes and that some gaining districts were considerably smaller than gaining districts in other clusters, size cannot be the only attribute that accounted for the gain or loss of special education students. It appears more likely that the administrative strategies and practices of districts contributed largely to the gain and loss of students with disabilities.

Though personnel in all districts reported they had good quality programs, there was some indication by directors of special education in the various districts that program quality did influence parents' decisions to transfer their children. Yet, programs did not appear to change overtly as a result of the transfer of students with disabilities. Since nearly all of the net loss districts were unaware of the number of students with disabilities leaving their districts or the possible consequences of the transfer, these districts did not initiate any programmatic changes due to open enrollment. For net gain districts, the impetus for change did not appear to be as a result of open enrollment but rather a function of school reform efforts taking place at all levels

within the school district. In addition, parents were transferring their children with disabilities into school districts with noticeably higher class sizes and special education student caseloads. These traditional measures of a "good" program did not appear to be factors keeping families in the resident districts with smaller class sizes.

Since enrollment size and program quality alone cannot explain the gain or loss of students with disabilities through open enrollment, it would be prudent for administrators to review the district characteristics that emerged from this study and use this information to develop strategies to combat the possible gain or loss of students. The following recommendations may be useful for teachers and administrators to consider when evaluating open enrollment and the participation of students with disabilities.

- Establish written criteria for admittance that consider class sizes and teacher caseloads.
- Monitor the applications for open enrollment and record reasons for transfer.
- Look for trends in the reasons parents are transferring their students. Communicate these trends with staff members so they may see their role in open enrollment transfer.
- Develop home-school communication policies.
- Establish relationships with parents of students with disabilities early in the educational process.
- Develop internal marketing practices articulating the strength of the school district and showing movement toward eliminating the weaknesses.
- Remain active in the IEP process for transferring students continuing to determine practices that are in the student's and district's best interest.
- Review programs for students with emotional behavior disabilities. With this population growing, it is important for administrators and teachers to initiate constructive changes in their programs and document how school choice options affect these changes.

Does open enrollment impact school districts? Yes, depending upon the conditions and situation of the district. Can school districts influence the impact? Yes, with attention to policy and good educational practices they can lessen negative impact and enhance the educational experience for all their students.

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